COMMUNION MEDITATION
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1 Corinthians 11:23-26
1 John 4:9-10

There has probably been more written about the Sacrament of Holy Communion than about any other aspect of the church's life. Although I have not read it all, I have read a good bit, and my favorite descriptive words about the sacrament were written by Dom Gregory Dix in a book entitled "The Shape of the Liturgy." Commentintg on Jesus' words at the Last Supper, ("Do this in remembrance of me") Dix writes:

"Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridgroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of the dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the Parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; in thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia; ~~for a village headman much tempted to return to fetish because the yams had failed;~~ because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna; ~~for the repentance of Margaret;~~ for the settlement of a strike; for a son for a barren woman; for Captain So-and-So, wounded and prisner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; ~~while the hiss of scythes in the thick dune grass came faintly through the windows of the church; tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously, for the canonisation of S. Joan of Arc;~~ one could fill many pages with reasons why men have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them. And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailing, across all the parishes of Christendom, ~~the pastors have done this just to make the plebs sancta Dei the holy common people of God.~~ "

To those who know a little of Christian history, probably the most moving of all the reflections it brings is not the thought of the great events and the well-remembered saints,

but of those innumerable millions of entirely obscure faithful men and women, everyone with his or her own individual hopes and fears and joys and sorrows and loves - and sins and temptations and prayers - once every whit as vivid and alive as mine are now. They have left no slightest trace in this world, not even a name, but have passed to God utterly forgotten by men. Yet each of them once believed and prayed as I believe and pray, and found it hard and grew slack and sinned and repented and fell again. Each of them worshipped at the eucharist and found their thoughts wandering and tried again, and felt heavy and unresponsive and yet knew - just as really and pathetically as I do these things. The sheer stupendous quantity of the love of God which this ever repeated action has drawn from the obscure Christian multitudes through the centures is in itself an overwhelming thought. (All that going with one to the alter every morning.)

~~The lost unity of mankind; is there any hope of restoring it in another way than th~~

The Session of this church determined some years ago that the first Sunday of the New Year was a fitting and appropriate time for the Sacrament to be celebrated by our congregation. It is a time both for looking backward and forward. As another year begins it is a time for reflecting on where we've been, how we've grown, what we've accomplished or how we've failed. It's also a time for renewal and rebirth, for new beginnings and new hopes and dreams. And it is appropriate that part of this New Year observance be the oldest and, still today, the most common act in Christendom. I invite you, therefore, to think with me about the sacrament as an act of looking backward -an act of remembrance, but also an act that affirms something that is real today and will be real tomorrow.

There is a commercial on television that I think is particularly interesting. It's purpose is to sell a certain brand of baking flour, and it does so by advising mother to "bake a memory". Visually one is transported to childhood, a cozy kitchen on a wintry day, with Mother and daughter working on a batch of cookies. It's a catchy and, I think, rather good commercial because it has hold of something very real; namely, the ~~reality~~ power of love remembered is something which love once did. The Commercial ~~is~~ depends on the ~~universal human truth~~ Fact that memory retains acts rathern than words; and the phenomeum that to remember the act is to experience the feeling as a current reality. To conjure up that warm kitchen that accompanied it

and mother baking cookies is to feel loved all over again. And the Madison Avenue hope is that you will feel loved when you pass that brand of flour on the grocery shelf and purchase a five pound bag.

We remember acts more clearly than we remember words - because actions do speak louder than words. Especially when it comes to the expression of deep and powerful emotions. Have you every been frustrated because you felt so deeply about something you couldn't find words strong enough to express yourself? Have you every experienced the inadequacy of the verbal communication, "I love you?"

When we feel deeply, we act. Sometimes a hand shake without verbal interchange speaks volumes. We literally leap for joy. When Purdue is down by one point with twenty seconds to go, the 14,000 people in Mackey Arena are not turning to each other and commenting that it's a very exciting game - even though that's exactly what they are feeling. Normal verbal interchange can't bear the weight of that kind of excitement. So people stamp their feet, and stand up and clap. If Purdue wins, people jump up and down and sometimes even embrace. If Purdue looses people slam their fists with their hands, stomp out, slam the car door and then drive home much too aggressively.

Pacing back and forth is a common expression of anxiety and stress. And when a friend ~~or fellow church member~~ has lost someone close and dear you and I try to verbally express condolences: we say, "I'm sorry". But the ~~And those~~ words buckle under the weight of our feelings: so we buy flowers, or bake a cake - or embrace them and say "Is there anything I can do?", which translates, "give me some way to express how deeply I am feeling for you because the words aren't getting the job done."

The German poet/philosopher Goethe observed that "The highest cannot be spoken; it can only be acted". That is the rationale for ritual and liturgy in the church. That is why choirs process and candles are lighted, music played and sung. It is why, in a way, clergymen wear robes and stand behind ornate pulpits. It is why men build churches and not just meeting rooms. It is why, 2,000 after the event, we have taken what really was a dinner - an evening meal - and enshrined the words and gestures in centuries of tradition. + liturgy

Because, somehow, that common meal - remembered and repeated liturgically - expresses more of our faith than any of us can express verbally. Somehow, bread broken

and wine poured out express more of the Good News of God's love than all the sermons you are likely to hear.

God - whose love for us this ritual expresses - spoke. He used words to reveal himself. He used the words of his prophets and the leaders of Israel to tell men of his great love. But ultimately God too had to do something. In the fullness of time an act took the place of speaking. God's word became flesh. A baby was born in Bethlehem of Judea: the love of God took the shape of a man - ~~he was God acting out his love for men~~ a man who spoke for God - but whose actions spoke even more loudly than his words.

In an essay on "Truth and Love" John Baillie put it this way: "Christ did not come to earth merely to tell us the truth, and if he had come only to do that, then his coming would have been of none effect. He spoke as no man had ever spoken, yet not even His speaking would have been listed to, if he had done nothing else but speak. Our Lord came to earth not to tell us what to do, but to do something for us. He did not come to give us a piece of his mind. He did not come to give us good advice. Thank God for that! The world has always been full of good advice, but the world has always been short of loving action, and it was to engage in loving action for our sakes that our Lord came to earth. He spoke the truth indeed, but He spoke it to us from the heart of a love that suffered and died for our sakes." (A Reasoned Faith P.58-59)

So we remember in communion a love that could not be contained in words, but which was expressed in an act - a man - a savior. And we remember by ourselves - acting; not talking about it, but by breaking bread and eating it; by pouring wine and drinking.

And yet it's much more than an exercise in corporate remembering for us. It's a celebration of something that is real and contemporary. That's the way it is with good symbols - valid rituals.

The flag is a symbol: it reminds us of something once done: of brave men in Philadelphia and Lexington and Concord. It reminds us of events and acts that have great meaning: Gettysburg, Omaha Beach, Iwo Jima. But the flag is a valid symbol only as it celebrates as well something that is contemporary: the unity - the common goals and hopes - the national adhesiveness of the American people.

Wedding rings stand for an act once done: an event in which we participated in the past. But they are valid symbols only as they represent a love that has grown and deepened over the years.

the corporate act of remembering

So The Sacrament of Holy Communion - the liturgical symbol of God's love - becomes a way of experiencing that love, ~~as we receive it in faith.~~ It becomes more than a sacred memory when we bring to it our love, our belief, our hopes and our trust. The scholars have always called it a "means of Grace," and that's what the phrase means. The ritual becomes the way of experiencing God's love.

We come to church on Sunday mornings, I would guess, for a wide variety of reasons. We come to communion on the first Sunday of a New Year with different expectations, with different memories of the year past and different personal hopes for the year ahead. We come - significantly - with different degrees of faith: some of us believe very much and some of us believe very little: some are hot: some are cold. But we come together to communion - not as individuals alone, but as members of a congregation - whose faith as a congregation is much greater than the individual faith of any one of us alone. We help each other, that is to say, to remember, to believe - and to experience the love of God.

"Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning - for armies in triumph and for an old woman afraid to die - while the lions roar in the ampitheatre or on the beach at Dunkirk" - or for that matter - on the First Sunday of a New Year.

"For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also the cup, after supper saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it in remembrance of me." AMEN

Our Father, we don't always understand the sacrament; we don't always respond to the ritual. Accept what we are able to bring - and help us to experience the miracle and joy and salvation of your love: through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN